

Repositório ISCTE-IUL

Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2020-03-10

Deposited version:

Pre-print

Peer-review status of attached file:

Unreviewed

Citation for published item:

Diniz, E., Monteiro, L., Torres, N., Tereno, S. & Veríssimo, M. (2019). Toward an understanding on father involvement in divorced families. *Devenir: Revue Européenne du Développement de L'enfant*. N/A

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-devenir.htm#>

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Médecine & Hygiène | « Devenir »

2019/0 Prepublication | pages I - XI

ISSN 1015-8154

Available online at :

https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_DEV_PR1_0003--toward-an-understanding-on-father.htm

How to cite this article :

Eva Diniz *et al.*, « Toward an understanding on father involvement in divorced families », *Devenir* 2019/0 (Prepublication), p. I-XI.

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Research

Toward an understanding on father involvement in divorced families

Eva Diniz*, Lígia Monteiro**, Nuno Torres*, Susana Tereno***, Manuela Veríssimo*

During the last decades, significant changes at the economic, cultural and social level have impacted the traditional family structure, leading to the emergence of new beliefs and attitudes regarding gender roles, specifically the parental roles within the family and the labor force (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Roggman, 2014; Wall et al., 2016). Women are no longer viewed just as housewives or caregivers, but as also as having responsibilities and aspirations beyond the family, namely at the professional level (Wall et al., 2016). These changes have led to the expectation that fathers would participate more in the household and childcare. The role of the father (beyond the breadwinner or the disciplinarian) has recently been associated with positive affect, playfulness and active involvement in the child daily care and education (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Cabrera, et al, 2014; Cabrera, Volling, Barr, 2018; Lamb, 2010; Monteiro, Veríssimo, Santos, & Vaughn, 2008).

A “new social ideal” in terms of family organization seems to be emerging with a more egalitarian sharing of financial, domestic and childcare responsibilities between genders (Cabrera et al., 2000). If this can still be a challenge within intact families, the difficulties tend to increase in divorce couples. Nonetheless, father involvement across different contexts and routines after the dissolution of the marriage has been overlooked by research (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2014; Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010; Jain, Belsky, & Crnic, 1996). This is a particularly relevant topic considering the increase rate of divorces worldwide, with a 64% rate reported in Portugal (Pordata, 2017). The current study aims to overcome this gap by analyzing father’s perspective on his own involvement among divorced couples, considering different domains and activities, and socio-demographic variables.

Received May 2019,
revised and accepted
October 2019

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Funding: This work
was supported by the
Portuguese Foundation for
Science and Technology
(FCT-UID/PSI/04810/2013).

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Characteristics of father involvement

Despite the fact that father involvement has been mostly studied as a one-dimensional construct, more recent approaches describe it as multidimensional and involving distinct activities (Cabrera et al., 2014; Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010; Jain, Belsky, & Crnic, 1996; Park, 2000). Father involvement can be understood as involving three main components (Lamb, 1987): (1) Interaction, related to direct contact with the child through care giving or sharing activities; (2) Availability, referring to the father's potential to be on hand to interact with the child; and (3) Responsibility, related to father's role to manage and obtain resources to child's wellbeing. By conceptualizing these distinct dimensions, the diverse forms of father's involvement are understood as not conceptually equivalent, appealing not only to direct interactions but also to managerial functions (Parke, 2000). Different contexts of involvement such as play, teaching, leisure, and activities with the child involving direct care (e.g., feeding) or indirect care (e.g., choosing clothes, planning after school activities) can be distinguished (e.g., Beitel & Parke, 1998; Monteiro et al., 2010; Parke, 2000).

Traditionally, mothers interact more frequently with the child than fathers do in all dimensions of care and play (e.g., Planalp et al., 2013; Pleck & Hofferth, 2008). Proportionally fathers tend to be more engaged with the child in contexts of play and leisure, compared to care (e.g., Brown, McBride, Shin, & Bost, 2007; Grossman et al 2002; Lamb & Lewis, 2010; Monteiro et al., 2008). In addition, fathers and mothers tend to differ on the responsibility for managing the family tasks, with mothers assuming the main role (e.g., Baxter, 2012; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). As such, fathers are often viewed as having a more supportive or secondary role to the mother (e.g., Monteiro et al., 2010).

Fathers roles within the family are affected by personal and contextual variables that should be better understood in order to promote positive father involvement (Lamb, 2004; Lamb, 2010). For instance, fathers' age and education are often related to different dimensions of involvement. Older fathers tend to be less involved in childcare and discipline (e.g., McBride et al., 2005; Monteiro et al., 2010), others reported that older men are more involved in direct interactions, than younger ones (e.g., Castillo, Welch, & Sarver, 2010; Lima, 2008). Less educated fathers tend to be less involved with children in general (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2011; 2018; Nelson, 2004).

Additionally, overload working schedules are considered a risk factor for an increase in father involvement (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2018; NICHD 2000).

Father involvement is also related to children characteristics, such as gender and age (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2014; Grossman, Pollack, & Golding, 1988; Planalp & Braungart-Rieker, 2015; Rouyer, Frascarolo, Zaoouche-Gadron, & Lavanchy, 2007). Some studies have reported that fathers tend to spend more time and to be more involved in caregiving with their sons, than with their daughters (e.g., Barnett et al., 2008; NICHD, 2000; Rouyer et al., 2007). These results, however, are not consistent and some researchers discuss the absence of gender effects on parental interactions (e.g., Endendijk, Groeneveld, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Mesman, 2016; Planalp & Braungart-Rieker, 2015). The effect of the child's gender on father's involvement seems to be lower than in past decades (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004).

In terms of the child's age some studies describe both parents as more involved in childcare when children are younger (e.g., Bailey, 1994; Baxter, 2012; Lamb, 1987; Wang & Bianchi, 2009). Fathers are more engaged in socialization activities with younger children (e.g., Schoppe-Sullivan, Kotila, Jia, & Bower, 2013), and become gradually more involved in other domains as children get older (e.g., Baxter, 2012). Other studies, however, did not found associations between father involvement and the child's age (e.g., Laflamme, Pomerleau, & Malciut, 2002; Lima, 2008; Monteiro et al., 2006; NICHD, 2000), which may be due to differences on father's involvement measures (Planalp & Braungart-Rieker, 2015). Nevertheless, studies with divorced fathers suggest a decline on father involvement, particularly in younger children (e.g., Aquilino, 2006; Madhvan, Richter, & Norris, 2016; Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010).

Father involvement in divorced families

Most of the research concerning father involvement is conducted among intact families, leaving unexplored what happens when couples separate and fathers do not live with the child (e.g., Appleby & Palkovitz, 2007; Cabrera et al., 2018). Although being a nonresident father does not mean to be an absent father (Cabrera et al., 2018), it is critical to understand how fathers are involved in childcare in this family organization. Aspects such as parental conflict, changes in family dynamics and new routines can be risk factors for father's active involvement with their

children. Generally, studies show that women assume the responsibility for childcare after the divorce, becoming overburdened and often feeling alone in the child's education (e.g., Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010; Hetherington & Standley-Hagan, 1999; Tach et al., 2010). Some authors refer that after divorce, fathers often become more distant, with a relationship based on entertainment and on sporadic social contacts, limiting their ability to participate in childcare and in the child's emotional development (e.g., Appleby & Palkovitz, 2007; Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010; Kelly 2007; Tach et al., 2010); having less opportunities to participate in the child's education (e.g., Appleby & Palkovitz, 2007; Dunlop, Burns, & Bermingham, 2001; Ozen, 2003; Villas Boas & Bolsoni-Silva, 2009).

Although previous studies have suggested that father involvement in childcare and education decreases after divorce (e.g., Madhvan et al., 2016; Pleck, 1997; Tach et al., 2010), most of the research focused on examining father's characteristics (e.g., Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Henley & Pasley, 2005), and did not considered the child (sex, age), nor the father and mother's characteristics as their age or education. The current study aims to examine father's involvement in different dimensions: direct care, indirect care, teaching/discipline, play, outdoor leisure in divorce couples, focusing on the father's perspective, considering parents age, education and working status/hours, as well the child's age and sex.

Method

Participants

One hundred and eighteen divorced (not living together) fathers, living in the district of Lisbon, participated in this study. In average, fathers' age was 35.28 (SD = 6.0; range 23 to 59 years) and mothers was 33.46 years old (SD = 5.14; range 23 to 50 years). Regarding parents' education it ranges from primary to University education (fathers on average 10.84 years; SD = 3.95, and mothers 11.84 years; SD = 3.76). The majority of the fathers (87%) worked full time (M = 8.48 hours/day; SD = 1.33), as well as the mothers (90.7%) (M = 7.88 hours/day; SD = 1.39). Children's ages ranged from 25 to 77 months (M = 55.11; SD = 12.75), 44.9% were boys, and all attended daycare centers during the day.

Procedures and Measures

Participants were selected from a larger study examining father involvement in Portuguese families: "Paternal involvement in family dynamics

and in the child development” (PIHM/GC/0008/2008). Both fathers and mothers were assessed and answered to a set of measures related to parental roles in the family. This study will only present the father reports regarding his involvement. Participants were invited to the study through the daycare centers where children were enrolled. The study main goals and procedures were presented to daycare headmasters that signed a consent form accepting the data collection at their centers. Informed consent letters were sent to all parents, and those who accepted reported on the:

Mothers reported on the *Family socio-demographic questionnaire*. It aims to collect information regarding the parents (e.g., marital status, educational level, working status, hours), the child (e.g., sex and age) and the family (e.g., income).

Fathers answered the *Parental involvement scale: care and socialization activities* (Monteiro, Veríssimo, & Pessoa e Costa, 2008). The questionnaire has 26 items regarding the organization and implementation of activities involving parent and child that occur in daily family life. It has five dimensions: (1) *Direct Care* (5 items) related with caretaking tasks, implying direct contact and interaction with the child (e.g., ‘Who feeds the child’); (2) *Indirect Care* (7 items) it is related with organizing the resources to be available to the child (e.g., ‘Who usually buys your child clothes’); (3) *Teaching/Discipline* (5 items) related with teaching skills and rules for the child (e.g., ‘Who teaches the child new skills’); (4) *Play* (5 items) related with play activities between the child and the parent (e.g., ‘Who plays physical games with the child: football or rough and tumble’); and (5) *Outdoor Leisure* (4 items) related to activities done with the child outside the home (e.g., ‘Who takes the child to the park’). Participants were asked to answer on a 5-point Likert scale: (1) Always the mother; (3) Both the mother and the father; (5) Always the father. Higher scores represent more father involvement in relation to the mother. The Cronbach alphas for all dimensions reached accepted values: direct care = .72; indirect care = .70; teaching/discipline = .70; play = .65; leisure outdoors = .70.

Analytic Plan

First descriptive statistics were conducted. To examine the associations between the five dimensions of the father involvement and parent’s and child’s socio-demographic characteristics, bivariate Pearson correlation analyses were performed. Further, two sets of univariate analysis of variance were performed to examine how parents’ and child’ characteristics

influence the different domains of father involvement. Previously to analyze parents' education, variables were dichotomized by the median value (Md = 12 for mothers; Md = 11 for fathers). All analyses were performed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 25).

Results

According to father's own descriptions mothers are still the main caregivers in direct (M = 2.43; SD = .58) and indirect care activities (M = 2.40; SD = .49); while they tend to share with mothers the socialization activities: teaching/discipline (M = 2.88; SD = .39), leisure outdoors (M = 2.83; SD = .48), and specially play (M = 3.05; SD = .42).

As depicted in Table 1, there was a significant association between father's involvement in indirect care and outdoor leisure and the child's sex. Also, father's outdoor leisure was associated with mothers' higher education.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations between the dimensions of Parental Involvement and Parents and Child's characteristics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Direct Care	---												
2. Indirect Care	.59**	---											
3. Teaching/Discipline	.65**	.77**	---										
4. Play	.55**	.65**	.66**	---									
5. Outdoor Leisure	.51**	.56**	.51**	.50**	---								
6. Mothers' age	-.01	.11	.06	.15	.03	---							
7. Fathers' age	.03	.05	-.04	-.04	.03	.57**	---						
8. Mothers' education	-.14	-.08	-.06	-.03	.31**	.14	-.06	---					
9. Fathers' education	-.14	-.12	-.13	-.06	.14	.07	-.05	.55**	---				
10. Mother's work hours	.10	.14	.13	.20	.14	.04	.09	-.19	-.26*	---			
11. Father's work hours	-.09	-.03	-.09	.05	-.07	-.25*	-.18	-.20	-.07	.04	---		
12. Child's sex ¹	.11	-.22*	-.12	-.12	-.26*	.01	.14	-.04	-.07	-.11	-.02	---	
13. Child's age	-.01	-.14	-.16	.03	-.14	-.04	.22*	-.11*	-.05	-.04	.04	-.03	---

¹ Sex was coded as 1 for girls and 0 for boys; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

In order to analyze how these variables may influence fathers' involvement, two sets of univariate analysis of variance were performed. The five dimensions were entered as dependent variables and (1) children's sex, and (2) mothers' educational level as the between subject factor. As for the dimensions of father involvement, a significant interaction between father's indirect care and children's sex was found, $F(1,75) = 3.84$; $p < .05$ ($M_{\text{Boys}} = 2.98$; $SD = .50$ $M_{\text{Girls}} = 2.79$; $SD = .39$), and between outdoor leisure and children's sex, $F(1,75) = 3.45$; $p < .05$, ($M_{\text{Boys}} = 2.63$;

$SD = .64$ $M_{\text{Girls}} = 2.30$; $SD = .57$). In both cases, fathers are more involved with their sons than with their daughters. There was additionally a significant interaction between fathers' involvement in outdoor leisure and mothers' educational level, $F(1,75) = 6.89$; $p < .01$, with mothers' higher education accounting for a greater involvement of the father in outdoor leisure.

Discussion

This study aimed to analyze among divorced parents, father's perceptions of his own involvement with the child, considering individual and contextual variables, advancing from previous research which has mainly focused on intact families (e.g., Appleby & Palkovitz, 2007; Cabrera et al., 2018).

Results show that fathers are more involved in socialization activities, particularly in play, than in caregiving or management activities. Also, fathers are more involved in indirect care and outdoor leisure activities with sons, than with daughters, and also that father's involvement in outdoor leisure was higher when mother's had higher levels of education. So, father's involvement, in this sample, is related with children's and mother's socio-demographic variables, but not with his own. Higher father's involvement with boys has been previously reported (e.g., NICHD, 2000; Pleck & Hofferth, 2008; Rouyer et al., 2007), with men being more available and involved in management and decisions regarding their child's life, as well as outdoor leisure activities. This result may reflect cultural and parental beliefs regarding gender roles (e.g., Endendijk et al., 2016; Parke, 1996), reflecting masculinity ideals, setting a role model to their sons by being involved in decisions regarding the child's life, as well as the type of activities performed outside the family. Socialization theories argue that not only fathers are more motivated to engage in sex-typed behaviors and activities, but also there is a social expectation to do so (e.g., Gryczkowski, Jordan, & Mercer, 2010; Morgan et al. 1988).

Despite previous studies suggesting that father's involvement is generally related to parents' age or education (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2014; McBride et al., 2005; Monteiro & Veríssimo, 2010), this was not found in the current sample. In general, mothers with higher education tend to have more positive attitudes regarding father involvement (e.g., Kalmijn, 2015; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). In the current study, mother's education seems to play an important role in father's involvement in outdoor leisure activities. This may be related to higher economical availability

Abstract

Important changes regarding the traditional family structure and the beliefs about gender roles, more specifically about the parental roles, have contributed to an increasing number of studies focusing on the father and his involvement in the

family, especially with the child. However, research is still scarce among divorced families. Therefore the main goal of this study was to analyze father involvement with their children (one child per family) in divorced Portuguese parents. Sociodemographic variables such as parents' age, education and the child's sex were considered. Fathers (N = 118) reported on their involvement regarding the child. Results show that the father's involvement varies according to the type of activities and was moderated by the child's sex and the mother's education. Fathers were more involved in indirect care and outdoor leisure activities with their sons than daughters, also father involvement in outdoor leisure increased in families in which the mother's education was higher. These results are important to understand father involvement as a multidimensional construct, and how it's affected by parents and child's characteristics, particularly after divorce.

Keywords

Father Involvement.
Divorce.
Education.
Child's gender.

(given the high correlation on parents' education which tend to reflect higher income), with fathers more available to perform distinct leisure activities (Monteiro et al., 2010).

Our results suggest that although new beliefs about the parental roles are emerging (Lamb & Tamis- LeMonda, 2004; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004; Wall et al., 2016), an equal involvement between mothers and fathers, in child related activities, is not yet a reality, and that may be more challenging in divorced parents. Nevertheless, it is important to outline that fathers still participate in childcare, contradicting, at least in part, the dominant idea of the absent father's after the divorce (Lamb, 2000; Pleck, 1997). Also, the findings allow to better understand variables that may enhance father's involvement in this type of families.

Nevertheless, the authors would like to address some limitations to the study: the lack of information regarding the child's legal custody, which limits a full interpretation of our findings. This data is not longitudinal; and is based only on self-reported measures. Only some dimensions of parent's participation and involvement were analyzed, consequently the generalization of the results is limited. Despite these limitations, the current study is strengthened by using the father, and his perspective of his own involvement, which is absent from most of the previous research using mainly mother's reports (e.g., Appleby & Palkovitz, 2007; Cabrera et al., 2018).

Future research should use diverse types of measures, e.g., observational. Also, other variables should be included, for example the level of conflict between parents, and how it mediates father's beliefs and practices regarding his involvement in child caregiving. Parent's psychological characteristics or family's socioeconomic status should also be considered (e.g., Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; Amato & Dorius, 2010).

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the participation and support from parents who have welcomed researchers. The authors thank all the members of the research team for their assistance and support.

Take home:

- Our study uses fathers reports on their own involvement, within divorced families.
- Fathers are more involved in indirect care and outdoor leisure activities with sons than with daughters.
- Father involvement in outdoor leisure increased in families where the mother's education is higher.

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